

Expanding Passenger Rail Service Testimony

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Imagine

In the right circumstances, high speed rail attracts riders and offers the nation a viable transportation option as we face the challenges of dealing with climate change and looking for alternatives to imported oil.

In Pennsylvania, Governor Rendell followed through and completed a commitment to partner with Amtrak on a \$145 million improvement to the 104-mile Keystone Corridor between Philadelphia and the state Capital, Harrisburg.

The improvements included 128-miles of continuous-welded rail, more than 200,000 concrete ties, 52 new switches and the first upgrade to the signal and electrification system in 70 years.

The improvements were completed in 2006 and allow us to operate trains at a maximum speed of 110 mph – the fastest in the U-S outside the Northeast Corridor.

The express travel time between Philadelphia and Harrisburg was cut to 90 minutes – a 30 minute improvement. That is a far better travel time than what it takes via car – anywhere between 2 hours and 20 minutes to three hours depending on traffic. People using the Keystone Corridor avoid one of our most congested expressways – Interstate 76, the Schuylkill Expressway into Philadelphia.

Riders responded to these improvements. Since the improvements, ridership on the Keystone Corridor has improved by 26 percent. The line will provide service to 1.2 million riders this year.

These Keystone Corridor improvements represent a first step toward building a truly national intercity high speed rail network. We have more to do in Pennsylvania. We are using some of the stimulus dollars to improve stations along the Keystone Corridor.

We are looking at applying for some of the stimulus money to make further track improvements that will allow top speeds of 125 mph and further reductions in travel time between Philadelphia and Harrisburg. We need to plan for possible improvements west of Harrisburg to Pittsburgh – a route served by just one train a day in each direction.

The Pennsylvanian Service that operates between Pittsburgh and Harrisburg cannot meet those requirements without substantial capital and operating funding investments. It takes over 5 hours to travel between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh by train and there is only one train in operating in each direction per day. A person can make the same trip by personal automobile in 3 ½ hours whenever they want to make the trip. Many of the train stations are in a state of disrepair and do not meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

In 2005, PennDOT completed a study entitled the Keystone West Passenger Rail Study. This study was prepared by Norfolk Southern with support from the Woodside Consulting Group. The study identified the capital projects that would be necessary on the Norfolk Southern right of way between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh to increase the level of passenger rail service to 4 round trips per day. At the time there were 2 round trips being operated by Amtrak. The cost for the projects that would be required to allow for this increase was \$110.9 million in 2005 dollars for line improvements. The study did not estimate or deal with other elements including:

- Riderhip estimates
- Other capital costs including stations and train sets
- Operating costs for the service.

Critics say Intercity and high speed rail is too expensive and a waste of resources.

They couldn't be more wrong.

Again, in the right places, such as along the Northeast Corridor, the Keystone Corridor and other high density corridors around the nation, an investment in high-speed rail makes tremendous sense and can give the nation real, workable transportation options for the future.

That's why President Obama's decision to commit \$8 billion in stimulus funds for high speed rail and intercity rail improvements is a good move. This investment will set the stage for ongoing rail improvements across the country.

But moving in this direction reinforces a point that Governor Rendell has been making all across the nation in his roles as chairman of the National Governor's Association and co-founder of the Rebuilding America Coalition.

The United States needs to address unmet transportation needs. Both transportation funding and program structure need a good going over in Washington. The United States has fallen far behind many other developed nations in terms of infrastructure investments – and passenger rail is a glaring example. Other nations dwarf our rail investment. Germany's federal government gives its states nearly \$9 billion a year for rail projects. France spends 20 times more per capita on rail than the U.S.

High speed and intercity rail programs are about connecting high density city areas and doing so will promote higher levels of sustainability. In Pennsylvania, our population over the last decade or so has grown by less than 1 percent but our increase in developed land exceeds 50 percent. We simply must take a different course.

Under President Obama's leadership, the federal government is reversing a long-standing attitude against passenger rail investment. So it will be important that the process of distributing this money be as transparent as possible. We need to ensure we are setting the stage for a rationale, effective system that will be in place for the long haul.

It is important to note that the federal dollars we are talking about for high speed rail are for capital – the cost of building these systems. States and cities are going to have to address how they are willing to pay the cost of operating these systems. In Pennsylvania, we have made those choices and in this fiscal year, committed \$8 million to pay for operating costs on the Keystone Corridor. These systems can't pay for themselves. Some tough local and state decisions must be made to make an intercity/high speed rail a reality.

What makes intercity/high speed rail successful? People want to use transportation systems that are frequent, reliable, cost affordable, and that are time competitive. Beyond the Keystone Corridor and Northeast Corridor, Pennsylvania does not currently have passenger rail services that meet those requirements.